

ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEDICATION OF THE USF-NEW COLLEGE LIBRARY

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Senator Bob Johnson

It has been my experience that history is oftentimes distorted, and the further away you get from events, the more distorted the facts become. There is a political saying that success has many fathers, while failure is an orphan child crying in the streets.

In my opinion, in the history of New College, there have been four major events, all of which have served as crossroads for the future and without which event New College and USF could not be what they are today.

The first crossroad took place twenty-five years ago, when a group of people decided that a liberal arts institution patterned after New College of Oxford should be constructed on this and adjacent property. A band of people set out to raise ten million dollars to fund the institution. Many of the early donors made five-year pledges, only to find that, within twelve months, they were being asked to accelerate their pledges and pay the entire amount within two years.

Many of the contributors of those days included banks and utility companies, some of which today could not, by law, make any such contribution as they did then.

Dr. John Elmendorf and the early faculty deserve recognition for achieving accreditation. Individuals such as Benton Powell; George Higgins; Dallas Dort; Philip Hiss; David B. Lindsay, Jr.; Ray Littrell; and Red LaMotte worked diligently to see that New College was founded. The Reverend John MacNeil of the Congregational Church obtained one hundred thousand dollars.

Over the early years, New College was best known for its liberal students who burned draft cards and did other exciting things to maintain a high profile of general negative reception in the community. The early academic achievements were oftentimes clouded by such events.

The fact remains, nevertheless, that the founding of New College was an extremely important event which allows us all to be at this place today.

The second major crossroads was the acquisition of New College by the State of Florida.

In early May, nineteen seventy-four, a reporter from the Saint Pete Times called me in Tallahassee and asked me what I was going to do about New College. I informed him, I had only been on the New College campus once in my life and did not know of any problem that I needed to address. I was informed that "New College is bankrupt" and was going to close its doors.

One hour later, Arland Christ-Janer called me and explained that New College was in great jeopardy and there were some eight hundred thousand dollars in salaries and bills to pay, with no hope of meeting obligations. I had never met Dr. Christ-Janer in my life and explained to him that a reporter had beat him to the punch on the issue.

I then talked with Representative Marshall Harris, who was Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee and one of the finest people I have ever met. Marshall agreed with me that the land value alone would be a major acquisition for the State of Florida at the price for which it was being offered and that, certainly, the land around our treasured museum should not be developed.

I then called Dr. Cecil Mackey, who was President of USF, and requested that he come to Tallahassee the next day, which he did, to appear before a special meeting of the House Appropriations Committee on the issue of acquisition.

Bear in mind that the appropriations bills had already been written and most of the monies available had been spent.

The Board of Regents endorsed the concept of the purchase of New College, and two people stand out in history as being extremely supportive, those being Jack McGriff of Gainesville and Burke Kibler of Lakeland.

The outgoing Chancellor, Dr. Robert Mautz, opposed the purchase of New College and did everything within his power to make sure that the purchase never took place, even though he has written in national journals as to how he saved New College.

Marshall Harris, realizing that the acquisition was not a sure thing, did something that was to assure the acquisition. In that year, it was the House's turn to have the Chairman of the Conference Committee on Appropriations. Marshall Harris came to me and appointed me to be chairman of the conference Sub-Committee on Capital Outlay and allocated three hundred million dollars to be spent by that sub-committee.

From there on out, it was all fun and games.

Terrell Sessums, the Speaker of the House, wanted to buy a new parcel of land to move the Florida State Fair out of downtown Tampa to its present site on Interstate Four. The entire Dade County delegation wanted to buy Interama, a project which had floundered but the land of which could be used for public purposes. Each of those projects cost six million dollars.

Terrell Sessums and the Hillsborough delegation would come to me and say, "What do you think about buying a new state fairgrounds?", and I would say, "What do you think about buying New College?" They would say, "Oh, we love New College. What in the world is New College?"

The Dade County delegation would come to me and say, "What do you think about Interama?", and I would say, "What do you think about buying New College?", and I would most certainly get the same answer.

Bear in mind that, in those days, we were also fighting for a branch campus of USF, and the fight, again, was as to where the branch campus was to be located, as between Manatee and Sarasota County.

I got the entire two-county delegation together, and we agreed that, inasmuch as this property is practically on the county line, it would be an ideal site and a solution to the ongoing battle.

At the request of Rayma Page, the Chairman of the Lee County School Board, I also tucked into the legislation almost two million dollars to acquire property in Fort Myers and create the Lee County campus of USF. That is also a simple amendment which has produced one hundred claimants as to who created the Fort Myers campus.

After the Legislature adjourned, with almost six million dollars in the budget to acquire New College and pay off all existing debts, I returned to Sarasota only to learn that Dr. Mautz was lobbying the Cabinet to reject the plan and refuse to enter into a contract. I flew back to Tallahassee, met with every Cabinet officer, and was assured of the execution of the agreement and the purchase of New College. Commissioner Turlington was the first to pledge his support at the Cabinet level.

That was greatly aided by the incoming Chancellor, Dr. E. T. York, who, at my request, came to Sarasota to visit the campus. When he visited what is now Cook Hall, I told Dr. York that, as soon as the acquisition was complete, this would become the new residence for the Chancellor of the State University System of Florida. Even without that occupancy, he was greatly impressed with the assets and became a tremendous supporter.

It also helped in the Cabinet that it was an election year.

There were a number of heroes in this process, including Jane and Werk Cook; again, Dallas Dort; and, certainly, Arland Christ-Janer.

When the negotiations became fairly well chiseled in marble, I called Chris and asked him when he wanted out of all this. His answer was: "Do not worry about me. Just save New College."

The second crossroads was passed. USF was established at Sarasota and Fort Myers, and the New College role with the State of Florida had become a model for the nation, not only as to its formula, but by reason of its great success.

The next major crossroads in the history of New College was the hiring of Lieutenant General Rolland V. Heiser as President of the foundation.

At the time General Heiser was offered the position, now state Representative Jim Lombard was acting as a caretaker foundation President under an agreement whereby he would not be there for a very long time. It is to Jim Lombard's credit that the first state match was proposed and carried to Tallahassee, which was a very significant event in this history.

The President of the New College Foundation who had most recently been terminated, before Jim Lombard agreed to his caretaker tenure, had distinguished himself by being arrested for drunk driving on U.S. Forty-one.

The foundation was in disarray and at the point of suffering a virtual collapse, the result of which would only have been to have the state completely take over New College and the foundation be dissolved as to any interest because of its failure to abide by the state and local agreement.

I remember the first time I met General Heiser, sitting around a table at Cook Hall. With less than good humor, I told him we were not trying to invade East Germany. He informed me and the others gathered of his history in education, both as a student and as an officer creating education for his forces throughout his commands in this world.

General Heiser did take the helm and put together the most excellent staff that now exists with the foundation. I have, on a number of occasions, had some warm discussion with General Heiser, as well as with USF and other elements of the educational system which surrounds us, but I have become more and more convinced that any lesser man would never have been successful in molding the foundation from what it was when General Heiser took over, that is, with less than two million dollars in assets, into a total value today of almost fifteen million dollars -- which, by the way, was our goal for the year nineteen-ninety.

In total, the foundation has been instrumental in raising twenty-eight point four million dollars under General Heiser's leadership, with seven million dollars raised for this library and one million dollars for Sudakoff Hall.

Our goal was achieved by creating a reliable, trustworthy system veiled in integrity and upon which the people who contributed could rely, not only to serve the purpose for which the foundation was created, but to enhance the academic excellence of students through the state contract, through individual scholarships, and through vastly improved support services funded by the foundation, from admissions to graduation.

The most recent gift of Mrs. Velma Slingerland of over two million dollars is a testimony and tribute to the strength and integrity of the program and of the foundation itself.

I am convinced that, in the arena in which we find ourselves, dealing with legislators, the Board of Regents, USF itself, the New College Foundation, the faculty, and the students, General Heiser has been the right man for all seasons.

The last crossroads of which I wish to speak is this library which we are dedicating this afternoon. The library itself is again a testimony of what can be accomplished when you pick up a tape recorder and it self-destructs after you have heard the orders on a mission impossible.

Over a period of time, it became apparent that neither USF or New College could continue to be as successful without a new library and resource center.

In nineteen eighty-three, this library was not on the Board of Regents list of buildings required or requested to be funded and any prospects of having it funded out of state dollars was zero.

Into that breach stepped Al Pennington, who came to my office and presented me with a plan to increase state revenues without adding any new taxes. That plan called for sales taxes collected by merchants of this state to be paid into the state no later than thirty days after collection. Under the old law, a merchant could hold your sales tax money for as much as sixty days, which meant that the money was in their bank accounts and fifteen million dollars in annual interest on that money was collected by them and not the state.

I drafted the plan and filed it in Tallahassee. Meanwhile, I called upon everyone humanly possible to talk about a library. Dr. Bob Barylski and General Heiser came to Tallahassee and made a numbers of calls on individuals.

It got to the point where it was apparent that the plan was not going to be adopted. Lobbyists for the regents campaigned against the project.

I went to Herb Morgan, the Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, and again requested the funding for the library. He told me, there was no way the library would be funded.

I then informed him that this plan would not exist except for Al Pennington and my having carried it to Tallahassee. My exact words were: "If you use this one hundred sixty-seven million dollars, all I want is a real estate commission. In fact, I want less than a real estate commission, that being only seven million dollars."



Herb Morgan looked at me and said, "You know I now understand, and you're going to get your library."

Meanwhile, over in the Senate side, there was a one million dollar figure put into the Senate appropriations bill for planning, engineering, and design.

In the Conference Committee, Herb Morgan kept his word and the House position was adhered to, and the library was funded, along with twenty million dollars for Manatee Community College and eight million dollars for water and sewer systems in the City of Sarasota.

Following the funding by the appropriations bill, the bids came in on the library at five point three million dollars. USF requested that the Board of Regents authorize them to spend the rest of our money on other projects they had, including spending almost one million dollars for a seawall in Saint Petersburg. I suggest that seawall or a water and sewer plant be named for Al Pennington.

I called Dr. Brown, somewhat unhappy, and that resulted in a plan where some five hundred thousand dollars of that money would be returned to this campus for additional improvements, most of which have taken place or are under way.

Parenthetically, it should be said that the nineteen eighty-five Legislature repealed the Pennington plan and, over a period of four years, is returning a hundred sixty-seven million dollars of taxpayers' money to the merchants of Florida by again letting them keep sales taxes for as much as sixty days, while we scramble for dollars for education, transportation, water and sewer, and otherwise. Forty million dollars a year will be returned to the merchants in a method of non-collection of taxes over four years, and not only will it be returned to them, but ninety percent of that money will be returned to eighteen percent of the merchants in this state.

I was the only person who voted no on that bill, and I will tell you today, it is still wrong to let anyone keep your money in their bank account for sixty days.

The whole point of this last statement is that there was a point in time in which a library could be built on this place. That point in time was during a very narrow few months in which it was actually funded.

Had it not been funded during that time, this library would not exist today and would not exist ten years from now. I can assure you, there are just too many other priorities in the State University System, and even on the USF campus, to have allocated this kind of money.

If you want to know where we stand today, there is a shortage of over one billion dollars in unmet needs for building public school, junior college, and university buildings.

So today we traverse to the fourth crossroads, another crossroad that, like the previous three, exists because of time and circumstance and because of a few people who did not take no for an answer. The rollcall of heroes is very lengthy and could never be totally called.

Certainly, the Ringling Museum trustees, for working out an agreement under which the library could be built on this land.

Certainly, to Dr. Bob Barylski, for his great plan for the Gateway to Excellence for these two counties, which gateway becomes more beautiful every day, as the vines climb high above the overpass, with beautiful Sudakoff Hall on one side and this library on the other, and certainly, to Bob Barylski, for the quality which he has worked to preserve: USF, New College, and the community in this place.

Certainly, to Dr. Bob Benedetti, who has been the best provost we have ever had the good fortune to work with.

Certainly, to Harry Sudakoff, George Higgins, Dallas Dort, Jane and Werk Cook, Mark Burlingame, Bill Kerby, Rosemary Bouden, Nell Eurich, Rita Kip, Fred Leary, Dick Nelson, Lou Robertson, John D. MacDonald, Bob Windom, Jerry Collins, Dr. George Mayer, and to all those who have marched to the tune of the drummer that says, education is one of the most important elements of a good and decent society.

And so, to the University of South Florida administration and faculty, to the New College administration and faculty, to the New College Foundation, and, most especially, to the students and the community of these two counties, I am most pleased to dedicate this library, with only one hope and that is, that every day will find us with a better quality of life, and every day will find this a better place to live, and every day will find our lives more greatly enriched because this library and learning resource center exists on this campus for each and everyone of us to enjoy and to use and to be extremely proud of.